

OLD MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE  
(Second Boston Town House)  
Washington & State Streets  
Boston  
Suffolk County  
Massachusetts

HABS NO. MA-1246

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PHOTOGRAPHS AND  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OLD MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE  
(Second Boston Town House)

HABS NO. MA-1246

Location: Washington and State Streets, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts

Present Owner: City of Boston

Present Occupant: The Bostonian Society

Present Use: Museum

Significance: The Old Massachusetts State House is the oldest extant public building of Georgian design in the United States. Built in 1712-13 to replace an earlier structure of wood completed in 1658 and destroyed by fire in 1711, the Old Massachusetts State House, or Second Town House, served a variety of purposes for the Province, for Suffolk County and for the town of Boston. This building became the State House of the new Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1776, and remained so until 1798 when the legislature moved to the State House on Beacon Hill.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The structure was constructed in 1712-13 (replacing the original structure constructed in 1658); interior reconstructed in 1748 (due to fire).
2. Architect: The architect is unknown, though the building had an important influence on the architecture of the period. Alterations made in 1830 were the work of architect, Isaiah Rogers.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Originally owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In 1803 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts sold its interest in the building to the town of Boston, and the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk followed suit. The City of Boston remains the current owner.
4. Original plans and construction: The original plan and architectural details of the 1712 building are unknown because the fire of 1747 destroyed the interior of the structure and also the original records.

5. Alterations and additions: It has been restored to its original robust appearance after successive alterations. It was built in 1712-13 to replace an earlier structure of wood completed in 1658. It was rebuilt in 1748 after a second fire. Alterations were made in 1830 and in 1881; and restorations in 1882.

B. Historical Context:

The Second Town House, as it was originally known, was the center of political activity and controversy in the Province of Massachusetts.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Old Massachusetts State House is of Georgian design, reflecting the popular style of the day, especially with regard to public buildings. This is the oldest extant structure of this style.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The State House is a two-and-a-half story, rectangularly shaped building with a squared, three tiered cupola to the center of the gable roof. The north and south sides along State Street are 114 feet, the west end on Washington Street and the east end on State Street are 37 feet. An area of 6,000 square feet properly defines the scope of the building.

2. Walls: The walls of the 1712-13 structure were saved from the fire and used as the basis for the reconstruction efforts of 1748. They are brick in an English bond, alternating rows of headers and stretchers. There is a three brick wide belt course with a top bevel above the first story windows which runs around the entire building. It also has a water table with molded brick along the upper edge. The walls in the gable ends are stepped. The east gable end was more ornately treated than that at the west end, with steps in the parapet filled by vigorously carved figures of the British Lion and Unicorn. The central circular panel was evidently first filled by a sundial; the clock that superseded it first appeared in a view made in 1826.

3. Structural system, framing: The second story was supported on the interior by a row of ten Doric columns, presumably on a long axis. The walls are of load-bearing brick construction.

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4. Porches, stoops: The Governor's Council Chamber on the second floor, east elevation, leads to a small balcony from which the laws were customarily proclaimed to the sound of the trumpet and beat of the drum.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance at the west end is at street level. It is framed by engaged colonettes bearing scrolled brackets, the door was topped by an angular pediment. There are also doors with angular pediments and engaged colonettes at the middle of both long sides.

b. Windows: The building is lit by large, square twelve over twelve light sash windows with wooden architrave surrounds with flat arched brick lintels above. The building sits on a slight incline so that there is a high basement at the east end. Thus, there are eight light casement windows in the easterly half of the structure, at north and south side elevations from the east side of the central entry and at the east end elevation. There are single twelve over twelve light sash windows in the stepped gable ends with a rounded window to either side.

6. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: There is a steeply pitched gable with stepped gables at both ends. It is covered with slate shingles.

b. Cornice, eaves: There is a dentilled cornice at the long, north and south side elevations.

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: The center of the dormered roof is topped by a squared tower or cupola. Its tower, with gracefully telescoped members, is enhanced by the aloof position of the building.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans: The (1748) interior of the ground story was one large hall (except for the two small offices at the north side and the two staircases leading to the second floor). This hall served as a merchant's exchange. The second story was made up of three rooms: one served as the Council Chamber and was the most ornately furnished and decorated. In the middle was the Representative's Chamber, with small lobbies in the stair halls at either side. The westernmost room was the Count Chamber. This housed the superior and interior courts until a new courthouse building was erected in 1769. The third floor, under the roof, was occupied in colonial times by a number of offices and committee rooms.

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2. Stairways: A new stairway and lobby, 11 feet wide, with a visitor gallery over it was built at the west end of the building in 1776. The stairway is an elegant, highly ornate freestanding spiral stair which rises up three stories in the center of the structure. During the 1840-1880 period when the structure was rented by the city to a number of commercial firms, the spiral stairway was removed. Two interior stairways led to hallways between the three main rooms.

3. Flooring: There are old hardwood floors throughout. The flooring in the circular hall containing the spiral stair radiates out in a sunburst round the base of the stair.

4. Walls and ceiling finish: There are decorative molded cornices. In the circular stairhall, the molded cornices are supported by recessed panel pilasters.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways: The doorways are surrounded by stepped architrave trim.

6. Decorative features, trim: Hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the Council Chamber was a large wooden codfish, "Emblem of the staple of Commodities of the Province."

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The State House sits on its own block with State Street at the north side, Devonshire at the east and Washington Street at the west. The current main entry is to the south side elevation, although there are entries at all elevations.

2. Historic landscape design: The scale of the State House building is low, reflecting the architecture of the period in which it was constructed. However, modern structures built around it now overshadow it. It is located within easy walking distance to the market area where Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market are located.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

A. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Prepared by Charles W. Snell, Historian.

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2. Secondary and published sources:

(From the U.S. Dept. of the Interior form)

Hugh Morrison, Early American Architecture (New York, 1952).

Massachusetts: A Guide to its Places and People (American Guide Series (Boston, 1937)).

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Massachusetts Historical Commission  
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ADDENDUM TO:  
OLD MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE  
(Second Boston Townhouse)  
206 Washington Street (corner of State Street)  
Boston  
Suffolk County  
Massachusetts

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